240 DAYS ON THE GATE OF EUROPE

“Between Hope and Death”

By Younus A. Alsallami

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"No one can escape a day that has been written for him in his destiny."
Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Taleb (As)
(These were his final words before he departed for Karbala)

11. October 2021 (Babylon)

It was the day I left my home in Iraq for Europe, after several attempts to immigrate. I had to leave my country by this route because there was no legal way to move. If I had stayed in Iraq, they surely would have killed me, just as they killed my brother in the past.

I was hoping to reach this continent that people call “the land of human rights”, and “the safe land”. I was watching the news about refugees who reached the EU and those who died along the way. As the EU publishing their news, you can only see how humans they are, countries receiving a different people from different ethnicities, religions and colors with all care.

Nobody knows there is dark side the cameras could not reach it, a side which was the reality of this story. The evidence about this story is completely proved but not approved, while the human rights court in Brussels had got feed with all the documents, pictures about this incident, and even this note which is into your hands right now, the case is still pending with no decision.

At 10:00 o’clock, after saying goodbye to my family for the last time, I went to Baghdad Airport With my friend (Zaid) who will accompanying me alongside in my journey (supposed to be).

My journey began from there to Dubai Airport using a tourist visa; if security had known we wanted to go to Belarus, they would not have allowed us onto the plane. At 19:00 pm, the plane left Baghdad. It was a deeply sorrowful moment. I did not know when I would see my family again. Maybe for ten years, I wouldn't see my family, my city, or my friends. Will I go back one day and hug my dad and mom? Will I return to Iraq and kiss my brother’s gravestone? It was a very difficult moment.

12. October 2021 (Dubai)

23:00 pm, I landed at Dubai Airport. Dubai is a beautiful city; you can see people from all countries coming to visit or conduct business. Only I and about ten other people from Iraq had a different path.

On this day, I changed my decision regarding my plan to cross the border between Belarus and Poland, formulating a more detailed plan for this route because I noticed that my friend who came with me from Iraq had changed his behaviors. He wanted to keep his distance, and I did not know why. Although I warned him not to make mistakes that might harm him, he did not listen to me.

He was acting like kids, or maybe like someone who just get released from the jail, I ignored that anyway and gave the priority for our journey, but with care.

The next day at 16:00 pm, the departure gate opened, and we boarded the final flight to Minsk. We were terrified because, in the preceding days, airport security had stopped some young men from boarding because they knew these individuals intended to cross the Polish border illegally. However, we made it through without anyone noticing us. My brother, Ahmed, was in touch with me throughout the trip. My flight was supposed to take about six hours to reach Minsk, but because the weather conditions were very poor, the pilot altered the flight path, making the journey last eight hours.

13. October 2021 (Minsk)

05:00 am, we arrived at Minsk. It was incredibly cloudy, rainy, and freezing. we went to the immigration desk to obtain the visa, and in that place, I was utterly shocked. Many people had been waiting in ques to receive their entry visas for three days in that hall. Some individuals were refused entry and were being deported back to their mother countries. After an hour, a representative of the consulate came to me and asked for my invitation. we waited roughly six hours in that hall before we finally heading to the hotel in Minsk.

I stayed in Minsk seven days looking for way to stay in there, the country was good for me, and it can be a safe place to get settled, only one thing stopped me and made me changing mind, the economy, it's sentenced under the US and EU sanctions, so it could not be the right place for work, for someone left his country.

During this time, I saw many people returning from the border; some of them were severely injured, and others had become completely lost in the forest. I was contacting a smugglers to help us navigate the forest, as no one can cross the border without a smuggler. At the hotel, I received a second shock when I overheard my close friend talking to some guys, saying, 'If Younus dies in the forest, I'll leave him behind.' I did not confront him about why he said this; instead, we simply got ready to head to the border.

On this day, we went to the border between Belarus and Poland via a Belarusian city near Poland called Brest. There were two routes to cross the border: either through Grodno city or Brest city.

Grodno was exceptionally difficult because it is near Lithuania and more dangerous. Many people went through it, but they failed to cross, and the Lithuanian border guards would steal money and phones from the immigrants they caught, beating both the men and women. Consequently, we gave more money to the driver just to transport us to Brest.

18. October 2021 (Brest)

23:00 pm, we reached the Brest forests. The border was about three kilometres away from us, and we were a group of four. I was the leader of the group, and we walked with extreme caution. I was not afraid for a single moment, but if the Belarusians caught us, they would return us to Minsk. we were exhausted because we carried far too many clothes and food supplies in their bags.

We reached the border at 3:00 am. The weather was deeply overcast and cold. We spotted the Belarusian border guards, but we avoided them and waited for an opportunity to cut the border fence. We were terrified of cutting the Belarusian fence because it was equipped with sensors; if someone tried to cut it, guards would catch them within five minutes and beat them half to death.

So, we tried shaking the fence, hoping a Belarusian guard would come and assist us to cross, but no one came. We remained beside the fence for about three hours until one of the soldiers spotted us and approached. I spoke with him, pleading for help, and handed him a packet of cigarettes. He said, 'You must wait until morning,' but we could not wait. Thus, we decided to cut the fence. We cut it and entered the 'forbidden land'. I hurried up alone, trying to cut the Polish fence, but I could not do it because there were too many Polish border guards, and the group was totally terrified, so they didn't help me at that moment, so I retreated back to the guys.

After ten minutes, the Belarusians caught us in this buffer land between the two countries. They interrogated me:
— 'Where is the cutter?'
— 'I do not know. Some people cut the fence, and we simply followed them.'
— 'Do you want to return to your country?'
— 'Of course not. Why?'
— 'Then give us the cutter, or we will send your corpse back to your mother.'

They held their guns to my head and threatened me, but I stood firmly by my words. lucky because they did not strike me.

19. October 2021 (the forbidden land)

In the morning, they escorted us to a small camp where we found about thirty people. We stayed there for the night, and by 20:00 pm, we were prepared to cross the Polish border.

It is a vast forest between Belarus on one side and the European continent on the other. It begins in the north with Latvia, then Lithuania, then Poland, and terminates at the border with Ukraine. It spans more than 700 kilometres in length and is about 120 metres wide. The most prominent illegal crossing points are Brest in the south and Grodno in the north.

I saw an Iranian family of about ten people, including young children. I approached them and asked why they looked so utterly exhausted. They replied: 'We crossed the border yesterday, but the Polish border guards spotted us, beat our men, stole all our money and phones, and then pushed us right back to the Belarusian border.'

I saw the Belarusians pointing guns at Poland, and the Polish guards pointing guns back at Belarus. They looked completely prepared to instigate World War III, and we were trapped directly between them. The Belarusians control all of this forbidden land, and it is easy for them to open fire on anyone—and they did. I heard the sound of gunfire constantly from morning until midnight, but I did not know which side the sounds were originating from. It felt like an alert for an impending war between Russia and Europe.

The rain did not cease that day, and we took cover beneath the trees. The soldiers handed us an axe to chop firewood. At that moment, the Iranian family asked to join us in our attempt to cross the border, but the Belarusians separated us and would not permit us to proceed together.

In this land, I saw numerous injured people who had successfully crossed the border only to be hunted down by Polish border guards and forced back to Belarus—many children, women, and elderly people.

20. October 2021 The Night of Crossing (The First Night)

16:00 pm, The soldiers came for us and announced it was time to cross the border. We were divided into three groups of four people each. We walked slowly, one by one, to the military transit vehicles. We rode for about 25 kilometres inside the forbidden land, after which the Belarusians cut the Polish fence and pushed us inside the Polish forest. It was a rain-soaked forest, and they warned us not to dare attempt a return to the Belarusian side. If we went back, they would kill us or forcibly deport us to our mother countries. Thus, we had only one option: go deep into Poland.

We continued walking without stopping for two hours. After that, we became separated from the other groups, only me, my friend, and two others.

We decided to rest until the next morning. The temperature plummeted to -20°C, the rain would not stop, and we could not see a single thing. The forest was extremely dense, and we could not switch on any lights to avoid detection by the Polish guards. Drones constantly tracked us all night, and we received text alerts on our phones warning us to return to Minsk. I advised the guys to maintain a 100-metre distance between every two people to avoid being spotted by the drones. Because it was so bitterly cold, I lost all sensation in my feet and felt as though every bone in my body was on the verge of breaking. It was a brutal night.

The Second Night

10:00 am, We woke up at this hour and heard the voices of farmers and the sound of an electric chainsaw nearby. Terrified of walking during the daytime, we decided to wait until sunset to continue. At 19:00, we contacted the smuggler, and he sent a new coordinate for us to reach, which was about 15 kilometres away. We walked together, but after two kilometres, we encountered a small river. The guys were afraid to cross it, but I told them we had no other choice, so we had to cross. Beyond the river lay an open stretch of land about 200 metres wide before reaching the next forest.

We had to cross the river and run fast across those 200 metres to avoid a small village on our left; if the villagers spotted us, they would report us immediately to the guards. We decided to cross. I was the first man to swim across the river and sprint into the second forest. When I reached it, I turned around and saw absolutely no one behind me. They had stayed behind the river, refusing to cross. I called out to them, but they abandoned me and took another route through the village. I tried to cross back through the river to find them, but as I did, I fractured my leg in the water. I tried contacting them, but no one answered. The smuggler did not reply until the next day, telling me that my group had gone another way and could not turn back for me.

My friend had left his phone with me in the last night.

Now, I could not cross the river again because my leg would not allow me because it's fractured. I stayed by the river for 24 hours entirely alone, hoping someone would find me so we could walk together, but no one came. My family kept contacting me, asking how the journey was going, but I did not tell them anything about what had happened to me. Only one close friend, Samer, knew about my situation. I called him to see if he could do anything. He tried calling another smuggler, but that smuggler said: 'I cannot do anything for him. He is in a highly difficult and dangerous place. Tell him to try to complete his path alone; perhaps he will run into some other guys.'

I almost froze to death. All my clothes were completely soaked, and my leg began hurting severely. Still, I took a chance, crawled across the river, and continued towards the second forest.

The first smuggler contacted me again and told me he could no longer communicate with me because my group had abandoned me. Now I was completely alone, without even a smuggler. I was shocked, but what could I do? I had to complete the journey on my own.

The Polish forest is treacherous to walk through. It rains constantly, and the terrain is full of swamps and wild animals. The trees are very old and liable to collapse at any moment. I was forced to walk only at night without any light, like a blind man, to avoid the guards and the police. There was no internet signal to check my GPS track, so I tried to navigate purely by the moonlight. Only God knew where I was. Ice began to fall on me. I did not have a sleeping bag because the Belarusians had stolen it in the forbidden land, and I had no dry clothes to change into. Exhausted and surrounded only by swamps, there was nowhere to sleep. Finally, I found two trees and slept between them, not knowing if I would wake up the next morning or die.

I had walked about 15 kilometres over those final days. It might sound strange when you read it—just 15 kilometres! But this forest is impossible to walk through normally; it is harder than you can possibly imagine. I could barely manage 100 metres per hour. Sometimes I was swimming rather than walking, and other times I was jumping between logs. I could not cover many kilometres in a single day.

At 15:30 pm, I finished the last of my food and lost my final bottle of water in one of the rivers while trying to cross it. My mom contacted me and asked:

—What are you doing? Where are you? What happened to you?'
— 'Mama, don't worry, everything is okay. I only have a few kilometers left to reach the transit car.
I smiled for her, but in my mind, I was counting down the

moments until my death. I was stuck in this forest alone, without food or water, and my feet had started to swell terribly. I kept moving but got stuck even deeper and could not go back. At 04:00, I found a hole full of fallen leaves, crawled inside, and covered myself with them until the next morning.

The third night

By the third night, I realised that everything I had endured before had merely been a warning of what was still to come.

Walking had become a battle. My leg was broken, and every step sent a sharp pain shooting through my body. Yet the injury was only one of my problems. The temperature had fallen to **minus twenty-three degrees Celsius**, and the cold was far more ruthless than the pain.

The freezing air cut through my clothes and stung my face like thousands of tiny blades. Each breath burned my lungs. My nerves had begun to suffer from the extreme cold, especially in my feet. At first, there had been pain, then numbness, and now there was almost nothing. I could barely feel my toes at all. The thought that permanent damage might already have begun lingered in the back of my mind, but I forced myself not to dwell on it.

I was completely alone.

Ahead of me stretched nearly thirty kilometres of swamp forest. There were no roads, no lights, and no signs of civilisation. The darkness seemed endless. Tall trees loomed over me like silent giants, their black silhouettes swaying in the wind. The sound of branches creaking in the night was enough to make anyone feel uneasy.

The ground beneath me was just as dangerous as the cold. One moment it appeared solid, and the next my foot would sink into frozen mud hidden beneath a thin layer of snow. I stumbled constantly. Several times I fell to the ground, and each time it took every ounce of strength I had left to stand up again.

Stopping was not an option.

I knew that if I sat down for too long, exhaustion and hypothermia would take over. The cold was patient. It did not need to attack quickly. It simply waited for people to give up.

Hours passed, though I could no longer tell how many. Time had lost all meaning. My world had shrunk to a single objective: keep moving. I stopped thinking about the thirty kilometres ahead and focused only on the next step. Then the step after that. It was the only way to stop the distance from overwhelming me.

As the night wore on, exhaustion began to play tricks on my mind. More than once, I thought I saw lights flickering between the trees. At other times, I was certain I could hear voices calling my name from somewhere in the darkness. Whenever I stopped and listened, however, there was nothing—only the wind moving through the forest.

The isolation was crushing.

I looked up at the sky whenever the trees allowed it. The stars shone brightly above me, cold and distant. Beneath them, I felt incredibly small. I was a lone man with a broken leg, struggling through a frozen wilderness that showed no mercy.

Yet I kept going.

Not because I was fearless. Not because I possessed extraordinary strength. I continued because the instinct to survive was stronger than the pain, stronger than the cold, and stronger than the fear.

So, through the darkness, across the frozen swamps and between the silent trees, I dragged myself forward. Every step hurt. Every breath burned. But somewhere beyond that endless forest was the possibility of survival, and that fragile hope was enough to carry me through the third night.

The fourth night

By the fourth night, I had almost nothing left.

The only things I carried with me were a bottle of electrolyte drink and a packet of cigarettes. The drink was my only source of energy, and the cigarettes had become my only source of comfort. Every time I lit one, I imagined it warming me, even if only slightly. The heat lasted only a moment before being swallowed by the cold.

I was trapped in a world of constant dampness.

The forest was soaked. The ground beneath my feet was waterlogged, and the rain never seemed to stop. It fell day and night, sometimes as a light drizzle and sometimes as a relentless downpour. There was no dry wood, no shelter, and no way to start a fire. Even if I had possessed a lighter or matches, they would have been useless in those conditions.

My clothes were permanently wet.

For days, my body had not been dry for a single moment. The cold water clung to my skin, draining my strength hour after hour. My boots squelched with every step, and the damp fabric rubbed against my skin until it became raw and painful. I could not remember what it felt like to be warm.

Hunger was becoming another enemy.

While moving through the forest, I occasionally came across clusters of wild mushrooms growing among the fallen leaves and rotting wood. More than once, I crouched beside them and stared. My stomach begged me to eat them. The temptation was overwhelming.

But I hesitated.

I knew nothing about wild mushrooms, and in that wilderness, a mistake could be fatal. Poisoning myself would mean certain death. After several minutes of debating with myself, I always

forced myself to walk away. Hunger was painful, but it was safer than taking a chance on something that might kill me.

My progress was painfully slow.

I would walk for a while, then stop and sit down to recover what little strength remained. After a short rest, I would force myself back to my feet and continue. The forest was filled with fallen trees. Because the ground was so wet, many of the trees had lost their grip on the soil and collapsed long ago. Their trunks lay scattered across my path like obstacles designed to slow me down.

Climbing over them was exhausting.

Their branches scratched at my face and arms, tearing at my clothes and leaving cuts across my skin. Sometimes I would lose my footing and fall directly into the mud. By then, my body was already covered in bruises, scratches, and wounds that had never been given a chance to heal.

Most of my travelling took place at night.

I feared being seen. I feared being caught. The darkness offered protection, even though it also brought danger. So I kept moving beneath the cover of night, guided only by faint moonlight whenever it managed to break through the clouds.

I would continue walking until the first light of dawn appeared on the horizon.

Then the routine would begin again.

As daylight spread through the forest, I would search for a place to hide. It might be beneath dense branches, behind fallen trees, or inside a patch of thick undergrowth. Wherever I found shelter, I would remain there as quietly as possible throughout the day, conserving energy and waiting for darkness to return.

Those daylight hours felt endless.

The cold never left. The rain never stopped. Hunger gnawed at me constantly. Yet every evening, when the sun disappeared and the forest grew dark once more, I would rise and continue my journey.

Night four was not a battle against a single threat.

It was a battle against exhaustion, cold, hunger, fear, and isolation all at the same time.

And somehow, despite everything, I was still moving forward.

The fifth night

The fifth night began differently.

I woke suddenly at around nine o'clock in the evening. For a moment, I did not know where I was. The darkness around me was complete, and the cold had settled so deeply into my body that every joint felt stiff. Then reality returned all at once.

I was still in the forest.

My throat felt as though it had been scraped with sandpaper. The thirst was unbearable. Every swallow was painful, and my lips had become cracked from days of exposure to the cold wind and constant dehydration. I reached for the last of my electrolyte drink and took a careful sip, trying to make it last. The liquid brought only a moment of relief before the thirst returned.

I knew I had to keep moving.

Remaining in one place for too long was dangerous. I forced myself to stand, leaning heavily on my injured leg. Every muscle in my body protested. My clothes were still soaked from the endless rain, and the cold immediately wrapped itself around me like a prison.

For the first hour or two, I moved slowly through the darkness.

The forest seemed even more hostile than before. The trees appeared twisted and distorted beneath the faint moonlight. Shadows stretched between them, creating shapes that looked almost human. My exhaustion was so severe that I occasionally found myself staring at a tree trunk, convinced for a second that it was a person watching me.

I was barely making progress.

Every few hundred metres I had to stop and catch my breath. My body felt as though it had reached its limit days earlier and was now operating on nothing but instinct. Yet somehow, I continued forward.

At around half past eleven, everything changed.

I took a step onto what appeared to be solid ground.

Instead, the earth vanished beneath me.

One moment I was walking, and the next I was sinking.

At first, I thought it was merely deep mud. I tried to pull my foot free, but the more I struggled, the deeper I went. Within seconds, both legs were trapped. The ground beneath me seemed alive, dragging me downward.

Panic hit me immediately.

I pushed against the mud with all my strength, but it offered no support. Every movement caused me to sink further. The cold, black swamp tightened around my legs like a giant hand pulling me into the earth.

For the first time since entering the forest, I truly believed I might die.

The darkness around me felt endless. There was nobody to call for help. Nobody would hear me even if I shouted. I was completely alone.

I forced myself to stop struggling for a moment and think.

My breathing was fast and shallow. My heart pounded so hard that I could hear it in my ears.

The swamp had already swallowed me almost to my waist.

I stretched my arms desperately in every direction, searching for anything solid. My fingers brushed against wet branches and loose vegetation, but nothing strong enough to support my weight.

Then I felt it.

A tree.

Not the trunk itself, but one of its lower branches extending out over the swamp.

It was my only chance.

I reached for it, but the branch was just beyond my grasp. I leaned forward carefully, terrified that the movement would cause me to sink even deeper. My fingers touched the bark for a brief second before slipping away.

I tried again.

This time, I managed to grab hold.

The branch felt slick with rainwater, but I wrapped both hands around it as tightly as I could. Every muscle in my arms screamed with pain as I pulled.

Nothing happened.

The swamp refused to release me.

I rested for a few moments before trying again.

And again.

And again.

The struggle continued for what felt like an eternity.

The mud clung to my legs with unbelievable force. Each attempt drained more of my remaining strength. Several times my hands slipped from the branch, and each time terror surged through me as I felt myself sinking again.

The cold made everything worse.

My fingers had become numb, and I could barely feel the branch beneath my grip. My arms trembled uncontrollably from exhaustion. My injured leg offered almost no support at all.

Yet I refused to let go.

Minute after minute passed.

I pulled with my arms.

I twisted my body.

I pushed against whatever solid ground I could find beneath the mud.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, I began to move.

A few centimetres.

Then a little more.

The progress was agonisingly slow, but it was enough to give me hope.

That hope became the only thing keeping me alive.

For nearly an hour, I fought against the swamp.

An hour of pain.

An hour of fear.

An hour of believing that every movement might be my last.

Finally, with one desperate effort, I felt one leg break free.

Then the other.

I collapsed onto the wet ground beside the swamp, gasping for breath.

For several minutes I simply lay there, staring into the darkness above me. Rain fell onto my face. My entire body shook violently from exhaustion. I could barely move.

The realisation slowly settled over me.

I had survived.

Had it not been for the mercy of God and that single tree branch, the swamp would have swallowed me completely.

I knew I should move away. I knew I should find shelter. I knew I should continue my journey.

But I had nothing left.

My body had reached its absolute limit.

The moment I escaped the swamp, every ounce of energy disappeared.

Still covered in mud, soaked by rain, and trembling from cold, I lay down only a short distance from the place that had nearly become my grave.

I did not care about the wet ground beneath me.

I did not care about the cold.

I did not care about the danger.

Sleep overcame me almost instantly.

The last thing I remember seeing was the outline of the swamp beside me, dark and silent beneath the night sky.

Then everything faded into blackness.

I slept there, beside the very place that had almost taken my life, until the first light of morning arrived.

The sixth night

While I was fighting to survive in the wilderness, my brother Ahmed was fighting a different battle.

Throughout the sixth night, he followed every piece of information he could find about my route and my last known location. He spent hours trying to contact organisations, volunteers, and anyone who might be able to help reach me. Every lead offered a small spark of hope, but none of them produced any real results.

As I struggled through the forest, unaware of what was happening beyond the trees, Ahmed refused to give up. He continued making calls, sending messages, and searching for assistance wherever he could find it. Despite his determination and countless efforts, help never came.

The distance between us was measured not only in kilometres but also in uncertainty. Neither of us knew whether the other would succeed in the battle we were fighting. I was trying to survive one more night in the wilderness, while Ahmed was doing everything in his power to bring that nightmare to an end.

The seventh night

The small amount of electrolyte drink I had left was no longer helping. My body had reached a point where it could barely accept anything. Every time I tried to swallow even a small mouthful; my stomach rebelled. From time to time, I would vomit blood, leaving me weaker than before.

I could feel my strength fading.

My broken leg dragged behind me with every step, and the endless days of cold, hunger, and exhaustion had reduced me to little more than a shadow of the person I once was.

At some point during the night, I came across a shallow depression in the ground filled with dead leaves. It was the closest thing to shelter I could find. I lowered myself into it and covered part of my body with the leaves, hoping to hide and conserve what little energy remained.

For a while, I simply lay there, then I heard something, footsteps.

At first, I thought I was imagining them. During the previous days, exhaustion had often played tricks on my mind. But this was different, the sound grew clearer.

There were several people moving through the forest.

I could hear quiet whispers.

Voices.

Real voices.

For a moment, I wondered whether I should stay hidden. Then another thought struck me: if I let them pass, I might never see another human being again. gathering the last of my strength, I climbed out of the pit and moved towards the sounds.

As the figures emerged from the darkness, I called out to them.

“Which country are you from?”

The group froze immediately.

I could see fear in their faces. In the darkness, covered in mud, soaked from rain, wounded and barely able to stand, I must have looked terrifying.

After a brief silence, one of them answered.

-Syria.

-I’ve been lost in this forest for seven days,” I said. “I’m alone, and my leg is broken. Can you help me? Can I walk with you?

The group exchanged uncertain looks.

Nobody answered at first.

Then one of the men stepped forward.

“Come with us.”

For the first time in days, I felt a small spark of hope, the man took hold of my arm and helped me walk. We moved forward together through the darkness for a short distance.

But then I noticed the others whispering among themselves.

Their voices were low, but I could still hear fragments of the conversation.

“This man will slow us down.”

“We need to keep moving.”

“If we take him with us, we’ll never reach our destination.”

The whispers continued.

Eventually, the group stopped, the man supporting me looked uncomfortable, the others turned towards me.

-We're sorry," one of them said. "We can't take you with us. You'll slow us down.

The man holding my arm tried to argue.

I could hear genuine concern in his voice:

"He can't stay here alone."

But the group had already made their decision, they gave him a choice, either remain with me or continue with them.

For several seconds, nobody spoke.

I looked at the man and could see the conflict in his eyes.

Finally, I smiled weakly and said:

"It's alright, Continue your journey with your friends."

He stared at me.

"And what about you?" he asked. "You'll stay here alone. You'll die."

I shrugged:

“It doesn’t matter. Perhaps this is my fate.”

The words left my mouth more calmly than I felt inside.

Then I gathered enough courage to ask one last question.

“At least… can I have some water?”

The group fell silent again.

One of them finally replied:

“We’re sorry. This water is only enough for us.”

For a moment, I could not believe what I had heard.

Seven days alone in the wilderness.

A broken leg.

Vomiting blood.

Dying of thirst.

And still they refused!.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the money I still carried.

“Damn you,” I said. “Take this money. Just give me a single mouthful of water.”

Nobody moved.

Nobody reached for the money.

The answer came cold and simple.

“Goodbye.”

And with that, they turned away.

I watched their figures disappear into the darkness between the trees, the sound of their footsteps grew fainter and fainter until it vanished completely.

Then there was silence once again. the same silence that had accompanied me for seven endless days.

I stood there alone, clutching the money in my hand.

For a long time, I stared into the darkness where they had disappeared.

Not because they had refused to take me with them.

Not even because they had refused to share their water.

But because, for a few brief minutes, I had believed that my nightmare was finally over.

And then I realised that I was still alone.

The eighth night

By the eighth night, after days of pain, hunger, cold, and exhaustion, I had finally reached the edge of what I believed was the second-to-last forest on my journey.

For a moment, I allowed myself to hope.

The thought that I might be approaching the end gave me enough strength to keep moving. Every step hurt. My broken leg felt as though it no longer belonged to me. My body was covered in scratches, bruises, and wounds that had never been given the chance to heal. Yet I continued forward.

Then I saw it.

A river.

At first, I thought it was only a narrow stretch of water that I could walk around. But as I moved closer, the terrible reality became clear.

The river stretched endlessly in both directions.

To my left, it disappeared into the horizon.

To my right, it vanished among the trees.

There was no bridge.

No crossing.

No path around it.

The forest itself seemed to be cut in two by this enormous barrier.

I stood there staring at the water in disbelief.

After everything I had survived, another obstacle had appeared between me and freedom.

The river looked unnatural.

Its surface was almost completely still, with barely a ripple disturbing it. Under the dim light, the water appeared dark and thick, more like oil than water. Large patches of algae floated across the surface, tangled together with branches, thorns, and years of accumulated vegetation.

It looked abandoned.

Forgotten.

As though nothing had crossed it for a very long time.

I lowered myself onto the ground and simply stared.

My mind began calculating the reality of the situation.

I would have to swim.

There was no other choice.

Under normal circumstances, crossing such a river would have been difficult enough. But I was not in normal circumstances.

I was exhausted.

My leg was broken.

My body was weak from days without proper food.

I had been vomiting blood.

My strength was fading with every passing hour.

The more I looked at the river, the more certain I became that it would be the place where my journey ended.

For a long time, I sat in silence.

The forest around me was quiet.

Only the occasional movement of leaves disturbed the stillness.

I remember looking across the dark water and feeling something I had fought hard to avoid throughout the journey.

Acceptance.

Not acceptance of defeat.

But acceptance of the possibility that I might not survive.

If I entered that river, there was a very real chance I would never come out.

I knew it.

And because I knew it, I decided there was something I needed to do first.

I took out my phone.

The battery was precious, and I had been conserving it for emergencies. But this was an emergency.

Perhaps the final one.

I opened the camera and began recording.

For a few moments, I could not find the words.

I looked into the lens and saw a man I barely recognised. Mud-covered. Exhausted. Injured. A face aged by suffering and fear.

Then I started speaking.

I explained everything that had happened.

The forests.

The cold.

The hunger.

The broken leg.

The days spent wandering alone.

The nights spent wondering whether I would wake up the next morning.

I spoke about my family.

I spoke about the people I loved.

And then, knowing what might await me beyond that river, I said goodbye.

Not because I wanted to.

But because I believed there was a chance that this would be the last message anyone would ever receive from me.

It felt less like a video and more like a final testament.

A final farewell.

When I finished recording, I sat quietly for a while before sending the video to a Facebook organisation called *Unified Rescue Team*.

Along with the video, I sent them my location.

I also provided my brother Ahmed's phone number.

In the message, I explained my entire situation in detail.

I told them where I was.

I told them about my injury.

I told them about the river standing between me and survival.

Then I wrote something that was difficult even to type.

I informed them that if they lost contact with me during the next twenty-four hours, they should assume that I had died.

If that happened, I asked them to send the video to my family.

I asked them to contact my brother Ahmed.

And I asked them to tell my family where I had last been.

Perhaps someone would find me.

Perhaps they would not.

But at least my family would know what had happened.

At least they would know that I had fought until the very end.

After sending the message, I looked once more at the dark river stretching across the horizon.

The water remained silent.

Motionless.

Waiting.

And as I sat there on the riverbank, watching the fading light reflect from its black surface, I could not escape the feeling that I was staring directly at the boundary between life and death.

The ninth night

I woke up at 07:00 am, and found my entire body covered in ice. My bones felt completely frozen. I could not walk because I felt the blood freezing in my veins, and I had lost neurological control of my feet. I was incredibly thirsty, but there was only one option: the filthy water in the river. It looked like motor oil rather than normal water, but I drank it anyway.

I dragged myself for about five kilometres, leaving just five kilometres to reach the transit car to Germany. However, I was shocked to find a wide, deep river blocking my path. I had to swim to cross it; there was no other way. It was near the city of Hajnówka. I could not swim with a broken leg. I tried to find an alternative route or a shallower spot to cross, but swimming was the only option. I knew that if I entered that water, I would likely drown.

I stayed by the river all night, pondering how to cross, feeling that death was imminent. I recorded a video message for my family to say goodbye, telling them I was dying and had no way to survive. I sent this video to a refugee support page on Facebook and told them: 'If I don't message you within 24 hours, it means I am dead. At that point, please send this video to my family.' After that, I tried to cross multiple times but failed each time. My feet were so swollen that my shoes could no longer fit, so I took them off and burned them to warm my freezing body.

At 14:00, I realized I could not stay there any longer and had to try my luck one last time. I waded into the river with my bag. I felt the current pulling me down, and death felt inches away until my entire body was submerged in that oily water. I don’t know how I made it across; I was swimming completely unconsciously.

Once I reached the other side, I lost all motor control and nerve sensation. I collapsed onto the earth, and I remember seeing my late brother’s soul near me before losing consciousness.

I woke up three hours later. I saw wild mushrooms growing near me. Having gone three days without food, I knew eating them

could be highly dangerous, but I had nothing else. I ate a large amount of those mushrooms and pushed forward. It was the last stretch of forest before the transit car, but I began vomiting blood and started losing consciousness again. These felt like the final moments of my life. I completely lost hope and prayed to God one last time.

An hour and a half later, I heard the sound of chainsaws and the voices of lumberjacks nearby. I spotted them five minutes later. Initially, they were terrified of me, thinking I was a criminal, but I gasped:

'Help me, please. I'm dying.'
— 'How did you get here? This forest is dangerous! What do you need?'
— 'I just need an ambulance.'
— 'Okay, we will call emergency services.'
Fifteen minutes later, an ambulance arrived alongside a police car. They placed me inside, checked my passport, and rushed me to the hospital in Hajnówka.

Hospital of Hajnówka

The ambulance sped to the hospital, and I slept the whole way. They woke me up in the emergency lounge and asked me questions about my country, religion, and nationality, and tested me for COVID-19. Afterwards, they took me to the operating room, pumped my stomach, examined my body, and treated my broken leg before moving me to a patient room.

I slept from that moment until the next morning. When I woke up, I asked the nurse for food, but she said: 'The doctor has forbidden you from eating anything for two days. You can only have milk and soup.'

An hour later, a group of doctors visited me. They asked if I spoke English, and when I replied yes, they were surprised and said, 'Great, so we don't need a translator.' They asked how I felt and checked if my pancreas was hurting. They told me I had survived by a total miracle; my pancreas was on the verge of shutting down, and I had severe stomach poisoning. The doctor asked me, 'Where did you learn English?'
I replied: 'I started learning English when I was five years old, and I also speak Parisian and Kurdish.'
He remarked: 'But I thought Iraqis were bedouins!'
I responded: 'You must visit Iraq first before you can pass judgement.'

I remember trying to stand up to go to the bathroom, only to realize I could not walk. When I stood up, I collapsed onto the floor. My legs were severely swollen, the skin had turned blue, and my nerves felt as if they were tearing apart. I cried out in agony. The nurses rushed in, administered an analgesic, and helped me back into bed.

A lady named (Halles) never stopped crying; her weeping even woke me up in the middle of the night. She was a Kurdish lady from Iraq who had lost her husband in the forest and did not have

a phone to call him. I gave her my phone, and she managed to contact him and update him on her situation. She thanked me deeply and became a true friend. Every day, I checked on her to see if she had heard from her husband.

After two days, the doctor noted that my health was improving significantly compared to the previous days. Every day, the nurses would take me to translate for Arab, Kurdish, and imprisoned patients who were sick in the hospital and needed to communicate with the doctors.

I contacted my family but hid my true condition from them. I told them I was merely in quarantine because I had contracted COVID-19. I also received news that the group that had abandoned me in the forest had successfully reached Germany. The nursing and medical staff were incredibly helpful and treated me with great humanity.

On the third day, the doctor came to me and said: 'We need your help. There is a 19-year-old boy from Afghanistan whose leg needs to be amputated, and we need you to explain it to him.' It was heartbreaking to see someone so young about to lose his leg. Seeing him in that situation made it a very heavy day.

On the fourth day, I considered escaping from the hospital, but I was terrified because the facility was heavily monitored by the Polish border guards. I made it as far as the hospital gate but turned back to my room, realizing that if they caught me, they would throw me back to the border, ending any chance of making it safely into Poland.

On the fifth day, my sister back in Iraq got engaged. I could not share in her celebration because the border guards entered my room and announced: 'At 16:00, you will leave the hospital for another location.' They did not tell me where I was being taken. I called my family one last time and told them not to worry.

I packed my bag and left the hospital escorted by four guards. As soon as we cleared the gates, they handcuffed me and threw me into a prisoner transport vehicle. Inside, a guard pointed a gun at

me and shouted, 'Kurwa!' At the time, I thought he was greeting me, but months later, I understood it was a deeply offensive word.

Białystok Polish Guard Centre

The guards showed zero respect for me or my medical condition. I expected them to take me to a refugee camp, but when we arrived, I realized it was a massive prison for refugees. Initially, they put me in solitary confinement for eight hours. They confiscated all my belongings—my passport, money, and phone—and gave me only water and a biscuit. The cell was freezing, equipped with only a tiny blanket. I fell asleep without realizing it until some soldiers entered my cell accompanied by an Iraqi translator who said, 'Salam Alaykum.'

Hearing that made me happy because I had finally encountered an Arabic speaker in this country. He took me to the second floor to take my fingerprints, and then they moved me to the basement. There, I was shocked to find many children, women, and sick individuals. They jailed us with absolutely no respect for human rights; it felt like a living tomb. The rooms had no windows, and the only bathrooms were upstairs. The guards would not allow us to use them whenever we needed; sometimes, they outright refused. There were no showers, and smoking was heavily restricted—you could only go outside with guards to smoke for five minutes a day.

No phones were allowed inside the detention centre. Because they had retrieved my records from the hospital, they knew I spoke multiple languages. They would summon me to translate whenever they pleased, even waking me up from sleep. Yet, when I needed something, it was denied. I begged the commander to let me call my family for just five minutes, but he refused. The regular soldiers were actually quite friendly, but they lacked the authority to do anything because the commander was deeply racist.

I got to know everyone in that facility: a Syrian family consisting of a father and his minor sons (the mother had been with me in the hospital); the Kurdish lady who had lost her husband in the forest (the guards had pushed him back to Belarus and jailed her); Ali from Syria, who lived in Germany but had come to Poland to rescue his wife who was lost alone in the forest (when he found

her, the police arrested them both); Hasan from Iraq, who was separated from his wife in the forest (she reached Germany, but he was caught with his baby and jailed in a closed camp in northern Poland called Kętrzyn, though after seven months he was released and joined his wife); an African woman who lost her foot to frostbite in the forest and was sentenced to six months in a closed camp; and Mohammad from Senegal, whose brother died in the forest. Mohammad had gone to the police, begging them to help retrieve his brother's body, but instead of helping, they jailed him with us. Mohammad lost his mind from the trauma of watching his brother die from a snake bite. There was also Jafar from Iraq, who suffered from diabetes; they sentenced him to six months in a closed camp, though he was released early due to his health.

Then there was Amin from Iran, who had travelled alone. The Polish guards pushed him back to Belarus, where the Belarusians beat him and sent him back to Poland. This back-and-forth happened four times. The last time I saw him, his body was covered in wounds; he gave up and begged the Polish authorities to deport him to Iran, but they sentenced him to three months in a closed camp instead, and I never saw him again. As for me, the court sentenced me to three months in a closed camp, but they refused to tell me the location. The translator lied to me, claiming: 'It's only for 20 days, and then you'll be set free.'

They transferred me to this closed camp in a prisoner transport van. It had no windows and no heating, leaving us shivering from the cold. Jafar was with me. The guards instructed me to stay close to him during the journey because of his diabetes. His blood sugar had spiked over 350 mg/dL, so I had to administer his insulin injections along the way. The journey took 18 hours from Białystok, and we were treated like dangerous terrorists. When we stopped at a rest station to use the toilet, they kept me handcuffed, and a guard escorted me inside with a drawn gun. People stared at me in amazement, wondering who I was and why I was chained. It was an exhausting trip, but we finally reached the closed camp.

Wędrzyn Camp

This is where I spent the most difficult eight months of my life. This place was a secret prison; at the time, neither the media nor human rights organisations knew it existed. The translator in Białystok had described it to us as a resort, promising we would stay a maximum of 20 days before being moved to an open camp. That Iraqi translator lied to hundreds of refugees and intentionally mistranslated their cases to the judges. He openly admitted: 'I actually hate refugees. Why are you even here?' He was incredibly racist.

The camp consisted of three single-story horizontal buildings. Each building was divided internally into two blocks (A & B), and the outdoor yards were separated by heavy fences. The blocks were designated as 205 (A&B), 206 (A&B), and 207 (A&B). Each block was about 30 metres long with 8 rooms, packed with over 180 refugees. This camp sat inside an active military base for the Polish border guards, hidden deep in a forest between mountains far from any city, with no official address. The address listed on our official paperwork belonged to an entirely different camp, but they told us it was ours. Even Polish citizens did not know we were there. No one would believe that refugees were being kept inside that military base. It wasn't a camp; it was a maximum-security prison housing thieves, violent criminals, and smugglers alongside us. No one could visit without written permission from the border guard general.

When I arrived at the camp, I witnessed a horrific sight. A crowd of refugees stood pressed against the fence, their faces looking like zombies. The first words I heard were: 'Welcome to the secret prisons of Poland.' I walked from the vehicle to the administration office, where they thoroughly checked my bag, body, and clothes. They stripped me naked and openly laughed at me. Afterwards, they handed me a blanket, a cup, some hygiene items, and marched me to Block 205B.

When I entered the block, some Iraqi guys welcomed me and brought me to their room. I asked them, 'How long have you been

here?' They replied, 'Rest first, and we will talk later.' I could not walk, so they helped me set up my bed and belongings. The block was incredibly filthy—not even animals could live in it.

There were only three computers for the entire block, meaning 180 people had to share them to call their families and contact lawyers. Can you imagine that? Each person was allotted only 30 minutes per week on a computer. There was no other way to contact our families because mobile phones were strictly forbidden inside the camp. The anxiety was overwhelming. Someone told me:
— 'We've been here for three months, and we have no idea when we'll be free. We've been here since August. Have you called your family?'
— 'No, I haven't spoken to them in 15 days.'
— 'Okay, we'll try to get a call through. When my wife calls me, I'll tell her to call your mom, and then your mom can call you via an international line. Just give me your mother's number.'
— 'Thank you so much. Also, do you have a cigarette? I haven't smoked in ages.'
— 'Sorry, brother. The camp store has been cut off from us for five days without explanation, and everyone has run out of cigarettes.'
— 'Thanks anyway, brother.'

I felt like I was ready to explode inside. Everything was horrific: the place, the food, and the psychological torment. The nerves in my leg caused me agonizing pain, especially at night, making me cry out. Compounded by the shock of what I had witnessed, I desperately missed my mother's hug.

I spent my first night dwelling on my family and my future. What would happen to me in the coming days? The next morning, a guy named Ameer came up to me. He was from my hometown (Babylon) and turned out to be a friend of my cousins in Iraq. He said, 'Your mom is on the line, answer her.' Hearing my mom's voice after 16 days was a shock. She thought I had died or been pushed back into the forbidden land. I wept like a baby in his mother's arms. I assured her I was safe and would be released soon. It was only a 5-minute call, but it made me feel human again. Ameer also managed to find a cigarette for me. At that time,

seven guys would share a single cigarette, taking turns. Four days later, out of desperation, we started rolling cigarettes out of dried tea leaves; we knew it was unhealthy, but we had absolutely no other choice.

In the Iraqi room, there was Abbas, Arkan, Ali, and Salam from Baghdad; Razzaq, Fawaz, Ali, Mohammed Raad, Abdullah, and Zeinulabdeen from Basra; Najran and Saad from Nasiriyah; Zaid and Raad from Najaf; Zainulabdeen from Baghdad; and Aso, who was Kurdish. There were many others from different countries as well.

Jafar, who had diabetes, was released after a week solely due to the severity of his illness, and I lost touch with him afterwards. Most people were incredibly friendly, though a few were difficult.

Everyone in that room had gone more than three months without any legal updates. There was a guy named Hasanain; one night in late October, the guards approached him and announced he was being freed. An hour later, they took him to an unknown location, and we never heard from him again, losing all contact.

Mohammed Raad had travelled with his father, but the guards separated them. A wire fence stood between them; each was trapped in a different block. Mohammed could only watch his father through the fence, unable to hug or help him, even though his father was extremely sick. I spent about three months in that room and began writing my diary there, but then came...

The Day of the protest

I had been in this detention centre for twenty days. Every day was identical; nothing changed except the faces of the guards. We did nothing but eat and sleep. I am convinced they slipped tranquilisers into our food because it was unnatural how long everyone slept.

On this specific date, all the refugees decided to launch a massive protest for freedom due to the horrific legal delays, the abusive treatment, and the fact that the guards had shut down the camp store. We rushed outside, took control of the courtyards, tore down the inner fences, and smashed the security bars on the windows to connect all the blocks. The six separate blocks became one unified area. However, the Polish guards surrounded us from all sides and called in riot special forces to crush the protest.

We didn't attack any soldiers; we simply blocked them from entering our blocks. During this chaos, I witnessed a deeply moving sight: Mohammed finally hugging his father after months of only seeing him through the wire grid. We held our ground protesting for eight hours. The media arrived to film us, and the general of the border guards came down to negotiate, selecting four translators from among us to speak with him. He asked:
— 'What do you want?'
— 'Just our freedom. We are not criminals.'
— 'That is not my decision. The court orders the detention of refugees, not us.'
— 'Then tell your court that we want to be free. You are locking us up alongside hard-core criminals. There are dangerous convicts here from Chechnya and Russia. We belong in a proper facility for refugees, not here!'
— 'We don't have space for you in our country. But fine, we will look into your demands. Just tell your friends to end this protest. If you don't, we will use force to end it.'
— 'Understood.'

He threatened us openly, leaving us with no choice but to end the demonstration. At 01:00, the riot forces stormed the blocks and

took total control. They locked us inside and deliberately shut off the camp's water system. An hour later, they dragged us outside into the freezing night to search us, suspecting someone had secretly recorded the protest with a camera phone. While we were held outside, the guards ransacked our blocks and destroyed everything. They threw blankets, legal papers, tobacco, shampoo, personal photographs, and books onto the floor, mixing them into the dirt, and smashed the beds. They found my first diary notebook, interrogated me, destroyed it, and penalised me with five hours in solitary confinement. Afterwards, they filmed the wreckage they created and posted it on social media with the caption: 'The rioting refugees have destroyed their own rooms. Look at them; this is why we cannot release them.'

However, the public did not swallow the lie. On the contrary, many Polish citizens showed solidarity with us, launching protests in the streets of Polish cities. Human rights organisations finally located our exact address and realised hundreds of refugees were being hidden inside this military base—especially after some refugees managed to contact activist groups and members of the Polish Parliament. It was only after this 'revolution' that we learned the true name of our location. We had been led to believe it was called 'Krosno Odrzańskie', but its real name was Wędrzyn.

December 14, 2021, The Day of the Asylum Interview

I spent about 50 days without a single update on my asylum case. Every week, the guards would hand me official letters from the court threatening me with forced deportation to my home country, forcing me to sign them under duress. They constantly used deportation as a psychological weapon.

On the morning of December 14, the guards came to my cell and informed me that I had to accompany them for an asylum interview and to register my fingerprints in the Dublin system, making me an official asylum seeker. I completed the interview and the procedures, and they informed me that from that moment, I had to count down six months, after which I might be released from the detention centre. Although this policy is incredibly unjust towards refugees—forcing someone who committed no crime but seeking a safe life to spend so much time locked up—I felt relieved because I finally knew my timeline. Despite losing two months here without any legal action, I felt genuinely happy.

For six months, I wouldn't see my family, nor they me, but I remained positive. At least no one could forcibly deport me to Iraq like before. I killed time by writing and sleeping. During the interview, there were no civilian staff from the foreigners' centre; the interviewer was a military officer from the Polish border guard, accompanied by a translator.

Many people face a total shock during these interviews because authorities sometimes bring a translator from an entirely different country who speaks a different dialect, forcing the refugee through the interview anyway. For example, how can a Kurd properly understand a North African Arabic translator? The reverse is just as difficult.

Life in the Wędrzyn Detention Centre

We lived under crushing psychological torment. Every morning, guards would burst into our rooms wielding batons and pepper spray, screaming at the top of their lungs: 'Five-minute breakfast!'

We had to scramble to wash our faces and line up by the fence with our cups. If anyone was even a minute late, they locked them inside the block and denied them their meal. Normally, no one was permitted to remain in the block, even if they were sick. I remember during my first month, when I could barely walk, they forced me to drag myself to the cafeteria to get food. If I didn't go, no one would bring it to me. It was November, and western Poland is brutally cold; during the final months of the year, it freezes completely. I couldn't walk on the ice because my nerves were damaged, yet they forced me to walk and withheld the specialised medication I had been prescribed at the hospital.

The man who had lost his brother in the border forest was still with me in detention, housed in an adjacent block. I saw him through the fence and spoke with him. He was completely broken, consumed by thoughts of his brother’s unrecovered body. Tragically, no one helped or believed him. One night, Mohammad lost his mind completely and smashed his head against the toilet walls. The guards dragged him away to an unknown location, and to this day, I know nothing of his fate.

Hussein from Iraq attempted suicide after waiting four months without receiving any response to his court letters. Instead of receiving mental health care, they threw him into solitary confinement for 25 days and then deported him back to Iraq.

I wrote about 90 deportation applications for Salam from Iraq because he, too, had waited three months without any word from the court. Shortly after, he suffered a heart attack. The guards drove him straight to the train station, shoved him out, and told him: 'Go to Germany.' They didn't even take him to a hospital to stabilise him!

Abo Mayamin and Abbas also suffered heart attacks, but authorities simply deported them back to Iraq.

One day at 03:00, guards woke Jafar from Iraq and told him he was being freed. They took him away, and we lost contact. Two days later, he called us to say they had forced him onto a plane back to Iraq, and he was now in the south of the country.

Khattab and Raed were also forced towards deportation twice; they were taken to the airport but were ultimately barred from boarding the plane.

Youssef from Egypt was a political dissident who had fled his country to avoid life imprisonment. He begged the guards: 'Please do not inform my embassy that I am in Poland. It will put my family in Egypt in grave danger.' Instead, they notified the embassy anyway. The Egyptian authorities subsequently jailed his brother to force Youssef to return and surrender. Out of despair, Youssef attempted suicide. The guards did nothing for him, leaving him to nurse his injuries inside the detention cell.

Ammar from Iraq suffered from severe asthma. One day, he was taken to the hospital, where doctors discovered he had lung cancer. Rather than providing treatment, they sent him straight back to detention. He finished his 6-month sentence and was released afterwards.

As for me, I began experiencing severe chest and kidney pains one day. I requested to go to the hospital. They told me I had to submit a written application on paper and wait for the administration's approval. Two days later, they finally took me to the hospital. After checking me, the doctor told the guards: 'He’s a liar, there's nothing wrong with him.' They shoved me back into the transport vehicle, and the guards snarled at me: 'Don't waste our time again, you foolish, lying son of a b...!'

The Food Menu

The food was atrocious. There were only three rotating menus for every single meal, repeated indefinitely.

• Breakfast:
  - A few thin slices of cucumber (one cucumber shared among eight people), two triangles of processed cheese, and two small pats of butter.
  - Cornflakes with milk.
  - Two cold hard-boiled eggs and two pats of butter.

• Lunch:
  - Potato soup and a piece of chicken cooked in pork fat.
  - Pasta with pork meat.
  - Mixed meat soup (beef and pork).

• Dinner:
  - Two hard-boiled eggs, a small pat of butter, and a dry piece of cake.
  - Two slices of cheese, two pats of butter, and a small wedge of an orange.
  - Salad.

The meals were frequently expired. The vast majority of the refugees were Muslims who cannot eat pork, but the guards showed no respect for our religion. Only during the month of Ramadan did they add an alternative option for lunch: plain rice and two pieces of chicken breast.

I was eventually moved from my block to Block 207B along with 13 other Iraqi guys. I spent about three months there amid many heavy events. The most devastating news was learning about the death of Ali, Mohammad’s brother back in Iraq. Mohammad and his father were still separated in two different blocks. We couldn't bring ourselves to tell them; their family back home contacted us and begged us not to say anything to the father or the son. Mohammad's father was already begging to go back to Iraq, so we

contacted the Iraqi Embassy to expedite his deportation protocol. A week later, when the father finally found out about his son's death, he suffered a massive heart attack. They did nothing for him logistically except deport him to Iraq. Two months later, Mohammad also asked me to write a deportation request to Iraq because they told him he would have to wait 18 months otherwise before seeing freedom.

I served as the primary translator for all the refugees, helping anyone who needed to write letters to lawyers, human rights organisations, or when someone went on a hunger strike or needed a doctor or psychologist. Because of this, I learned a great deal about the inner workings of the detention centre. Sometimes, I found myself unable to translate certain words back to the refugees because the guards used highly offensive, racist language.

When I moved to this new block, I attempted to write my diary again. This time, I wrote it using highly complex, formal Arabic to bypass the security checks. I wrote exclusively at night and hid the pages inside my pillow every morning.

We felt incredibly bleak as we rang in the New Year inside a prison, stripped of the right to make video calls to our families. Soon after, the war between Russia and Ukraine erupted. Being so close to the Ukrainian border, panic set in when the Russian President threatened the European Union, implying that Poland would be the next target. We were terrified, but I hid from my family that we were locked inside an active military base. I watched as they reinforced the base with more troops, armoured vehicles, and even stationed a tank directly in front of our block. Celebrations of any kind were strictly forbidden.

The sounds of live-fire military drills never stopped, echoing from morning until midnight every day. The officers used this atmosphere to threaten the refugees, warning that if anyone caused trouble, they would be transferred to a camp right on the Ukrainian border. They had already moved about 200 refugees to that border facility.

If you want to see the exact location of the Wędrzyn camp, you can find it on Google Maps by entering these precise coordinates: 52.419992, 15.172868. Simply copy and paste them into the search bar.

I sat watching the news one day and saw the Polish President announce: 'We welcome all refugees from around the world. We are receiving the Ukrainian people, and anyone who comes to Poland will be welcomed!' I watched this statement while sitting inside one of the filthiest prisons in Poland. He was indeed welcoming Ukrainian citizens, but what about the rest of us? That same day, an officer asked me:
— 'Why are you in my country?'
— 'To find a life free of war.'
— 'We don't want you in our country. Why did you come to us?'
— 'Okay, then why did your military come to my country in 2003? I saw your army occupying my city when I was an infant!'
— 'Yes, well, we came to spread peace in Iraq.'
— 'And do you think you brought peace?'
— 'Of course, yes.'
— 'Did you succeed in spreading that peace?'
— 'No!'
— 'So, when I saw that you failed to bring peace to us, I came to you to get that peace from its source, just as you promised.'
I never saw that officer again after that conversation.

Karam

Karam was one of the few people I met during my time in detention whom I can honestly say left a lasting impression on me.

He was a young Palestinian who had arrived in Poland around the New Year period after travelling from Greece in an attempt to reach Western Europe. His journey, however, came to an abrupt halt when he was arrested at Warsaw Airport and transferred to the detention centre in Wędrzyn on New Year's Eve.

When I first met him, I immediately sensed that he was different.

Many people in detention spent their days complaining, counting the hours until release, or dwelling endlessly on their misfortunes. Karam was not one of them. He possessed a strong character, a clear mind, and a determination that stood out from the crowd. There was a confidence in the way he spoke and carried himself, not arrogance, but the

confidence of someone who had already faced many hardships in life and learned how to endure them.

It did not take long for us to become friends.

What began as casual conversations soon developed into a genuine friendship. Day after day, we found ourselves spending more and more time together. We shared ideas, discussed our experiences, debated our opinions, and explored new perspectives. There were subjects on which we completely agreed, others on which we disagreed, and many that we discovered together through long conversations.

Looking back, Karam was the only person in detention with whom I truly felt that time was valuable.

Most friendships in prison-like environments are built out of necessity. People speak because there is little else to do. But with Karam, it was different. I never felt that our conversations existed merely to pass the time. Every discussion seemed meaningful in its own way.

Strangely enough, we rarely spent our days talking about when we would be released or what life would look like afterwards.

We both had ambitions and plans for the future, but neither of us was obsessed with predicting it. There was an unspoken trust between us. Each of us believed that the other would eventually find his own path.

Because of that, there was never any pressure to impress one another or prove anything.

I never remember feeling bored while talking to him.

By good fortune, Karam's release date was close to my own. Knowing that our sentences would end around the same period gave us something to look forward to.

Together, we developed routines that helped us survive the endless repetition of detention life.

We spent long evenings reading books and watching films. We tried to fill the empty hours with whatever activities were available to us. Over time, we deliberately created a structure for our days, almost as though we were preparing for a long-term stay rather than waiting for release.

The routine became our defence against overthinking.

At seven o'clock each morning, we would wake up and make coffee. Sometimes we listened to Fairuz while drinking it, allowing her voice to transport us somewhere beyond the prison walls. Other days, we would visit the computer room to search for information online, read articles, or simply satisfy our curiosity about the world outside. Occasionally we played games to distract ourselves from the monotony.

In the evenings, after dinner, we would usually choose a film and watch it together.

Simple habits, perhaps.

But inside detention, those small rituals gave shape to the days and prevented them from blending into one endless stretch of time.

Later, Karam was transferred with me to the detention centre in Krosno, where we spent the second half of our sentences together.

By then, our friendship had grown even stronger.

The more I learned about him, the more I respected him.

Karam had left his family while still very young and had spent years fighting his own battles across different countries. His journey had taken him through Istanbul, then Greece, and eventually to Poland. Everywhere he went, he faced uncertainty, hardship, and the constant challenge of building a future from nothing.

Yet despite everything, he never lost his determination.

He remained disciplined, aware, and remarkably resilient.

His original destination had been Belgium. That was where he intended to build a new life. But as time passed, his plans evolved. Gradually, Germany became the country where he envisioned his future and where he hoped to establish long-term stability.

As for us, we had our own plan.

We agreed that if Karam was released before me, he would wait either in Poland or in Berlin. Then, if circumstances allowed, we would meet again and continue our journey together.

At the time, it seemed like a simple plan.

Two friends making promises about the future while sitting behind fences and locked doors.

But in a place where freedom was uncertain and tomorrow was never guaranteed, those plans meant more than they appeared.

They represented hope.

And sometimes, hope is the most valuable thing two people can share.

The First Iraqi to Taste Freedom!

I wrote previously about Hasanain, the Iraqi guy from Block 205B who was taken away by soldiers to an unknown location, causing us to assume he had died because all contact was lost.

On January 27, 2022, Hasanain suddenly walked back into Wędrzyn. We were stunned. 'Where on earth have you been?' we asked.

He explained that after the guards told him he was free, they actually transferred him to a high-security criminal prison called Suwałki in northeastern Poland. A court had sentenced him to three months in prison simply because they found a photo on his phone that they deemed suspicious, even though it wasn't real. The court had the power to extend that sentence up to five years. They threw him in among hardened criminals serving 25-year to life sentences. With no access to phones or computers, he had no way to inform his family where he was. He was systematically tortured; he told us they beat him daily and bullied him relentlessly because he was short and spoke only Arabic.

He spent three months in Wędrzyn, followed by three months of torment in Suwałki, and was then returned to Wędrzyn for another month before they finally granted him an interview for international protection. He lost seven months of his life in Polish prisons for absolutely no reason. At that moment, he was in another closed facility counting down his final month. He spent a full year inside the Polish detention system.

April 30, 2022

I am writing this from the Wędrzyn camp on a rare sunny day. Today marks exactly six months since I arrived here, leaving me with one month and 15 days to go. I am terrified because my final asylum interview is scheduled for next week. If they reject my case, they can extend my detention for another full year. My family still has no inkling of the torture I've endured here; they haven't seen me in six months. I lie to them, telling them we eat wonderful food, sleep in beautiful rooms, and live in a peaceful small village rather than a prison. I never mention my fear that this military base could be bombed at any moment if a conflict erupts between Europe and Russia.

Tomorrow is the first day of Eid. We should be celebrating, but the guards have forbidden us from doing anything.

I've noticed that almost everyone in this facility has developed mental health issues due to the psychological pressure from the guards. They play sadistic games; one day, they approached a guy and told him to pack his bags because he was being released. Overjoyed, he went down to the main gate, only for them to turn him back, saying: 'Oh, sorry, it was a mistake. Go back to your room.' They repeated this cruel tactic on people multiple times.

In these six months, I haven't learned a single useful Polish word because they forbid us from learning. The only words I picked up were 'Kurwa' (a curse word) and 'Śmierdzi' (it stinks).

The Camp Near the Ukrainian Border

This became their preferred method of intimidation. About 100 refugees from Wędrzyn were transferred there. Every morning, terror gripped us when the officers walked in reading off the transfer list. It is a notorious punishment camp; anyone who tries to launch a hunger strike or a protest is sent there. Now, all the blocks have fallen silent. Many were transferred, and a few were released. Ayoub from Yemen had already spent a full year in a closed camp without any progress on his case when he arrived at that border facility. Out of sheer despair, he attempted suicide. After slashing his wrists, the guards tackled him, beat him, and locked him in solitary confinement for three days. Fortunately, I avoided that camp; instead, I was transferred to the camp at Krosno Odrzańskie, meaning I had only one month left until my projected release.

May 9, 2022 | Krosno Odrzańskie

Today, they transferred me along with 25 other guys from Wędrzyn to Krosno Odrzańskie. This camp is slightly better than the last one because it sits inside a city rather than being buried deep in a forest. The food is also a bit better, but we have no idea if we will stay here or be shuffled to yet another facility. I am completely exhausted, so I have decided to end my diary here. Surveillance on our rooms is much tighter, making it impossible to continue writing in secret.

Only one major incident occurred during my time in this camp. Seven individuals launched a total hunger strike for eight days after receiving their second asylum rejection. They came dangerously close to death, refusing all sustenance for over a week, but the guards simply threatened to throw them into solitary confinement if they didn't end the strike. A member of Parliament came to meet them, and I served as their translator. However, he merely advised them to be patient, explaining he had no power to release them since the final decision rested strictly with the immigration court.

I also remember a man from Sri Lanka who suffered from severe diabetes. They amputated one of his toes and brought him straight back to the detention centre without any proper medical aftercare. On May 31, I woke up to a guard striking me. They shoved us out of the room and completely turned it upside down for no reason at all.

The guards seemed to derive amusement from tormenting us and watching us suffer. Many hurled constant insults. They would grow furious whenever they saw someone about to be released, banning us from throwing any farewell parties. I remember the night Ahmed from Kurdistan was cleared for release; we threw a small celebration in my room. The guards stormed in, smashed our headphones, tore the room apart, and threatened: 'If you do this again, no one else is getting out.'

The Law of International Protection in Poland

The system functions like a lottery. When you apply for international protection, you are forced to wait. You might have your fingerprints taken on the very first day, or you might wait two months like I did. However, from the exact moment you request asylum, they place you in a closed camp, issuing a standard 6-month detention sentence. Six months is the bare minimum, and it can easily be extended. If you don't receive your asylum interview within those six months, you are automatically released. Similarly, if you complete the interview but receive only one negative decision, you are freed after the six months are up.

However, if they subject you to a second interview and issue a second rejection within that timeframe, they hold the legal authority to extend your detention to 18 months and deport you to your home country. No one explains these rules to you inside the prison, and there is no legal loophole out except this timeline. It truly comes down to luck: if they schedule your interview during the first few months of your detention, they will issue the second rejection quickly and extend your sentence to 18 months. But if you are lucky and they delay your asylum interview until the very final month of your 6-month sentence, your release is 100% guaranteed.

The Role of Organizations and Volunteers in Poland

All honour, glory, and gratitude belong to these incredible people who supported us both inside the detention centres and after our release. They provided us with food, clothing, and international phone cards to call our families, offering crucial moral and psychological support.

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• No Border Team
• Nomada Stowarzyszenie

23.oct.21 poland forest border

A picture from (No border team) achieve

30.october.21 Hajnówka hospital

25.nov.21 Wedrzyn detaintion camp during the protest of the asylum seekers

The prison of Krosno